

Robert C. Hoyle

To the Tetons by Train

*A Shoshone Indian lit a signal fire on the banks of the Wind River in Wyoming. A trapper made the rounds of his oval of traps and brought back a fortune in bear and silver fox. A little handful of pioneers blazed a way through the lodgepole pines. A cowboy cantered across a free range and sang to his cattle at midnight. Then across the last page of the frontier, through its color of romance and adventure, came the railroad.*¹

By the time this introduction to a Chicago and North Western Railway travel brochure advertising the “Teton Mountain Route” to Yellowstone National Park was written in 1922, the railroad had indeed crossed most of the last pages of the frontier. However, a railroad had never entered Jackson Hole, Wyoming and the Teton country, and even a close rail connection to the valley often called “the last of the old West” had been a reality for only a few years.

The possibility of a railroad for Jackson Hole can be traced back to many early rumors—some based in fact, others purely fictional. The Yellowstone Park Branch Line of the Northern Pacific Railroad reached Cinnabar, Montana, 51 miles south of Livingston, in 1883, and was extended to the North Entrance of the park in 1902.² Local newspapers reported that the initial surveys for this line had actually extended along several different routes through Yellowstone into the Jackson Hole country to the south.³ Additional reports alluded to the possibility of a branch line of the Union Pacific Railroad extending from its transcontinental main line across the continental divide at Togwotee Pass, west into Jackson Hole, and then north to the South Entrance of Yellowstone National Park.⁴ Many objections to the building of railroads inside Yellowstone and difficulties associated with Togwotee Pass contributed to the failure of these initial schemes. A few years later, the Oregon Short Line, a subsidiary of the Union Pacific Railroad, began construction of its Yellowstone Park Railroad from St. Anthony, Idaho. The first train arrived in Ashton, Idaho, 17 miles from St.

Anthony, in June of 1906, and the line was extended to the West Entrance of Yellowstone National Park (to a town that would soon be renamed West Yellowstone), by late 1907. Passenger service to the park began the following season.⁵ It was this Oregon Short Line branch that was ultimately to lead to a close rail connection to Jackson Hole.

Conant Pass, at the extreme northern end of the Teton Range, had long been an entry route into Jackson Hole used by numerous American Indian tribes for their seasonal journey into the valley. By the 1830s, when Jackson Hole had become an important crossroads of the fur trade, trappers entering the valley from the northwest often used this old Indian trail. With the completion of the rail line to the West Entrance of Yellowstone, rumors soon surfaced concerning a railroad over this historic entry into Jackson Hole to provide service to the South Entrance of Yellowstone. These rumors were fueled in part by U.S. Forest Service reports of railroad surveys headed toward Conant Pass.⁶ Also, by 1909, the Chicago and North Western Railway had reached Lander, Wyoming, about 150 miles east of Jackson Hole, with speculation that the line would be extended westward toward Togwotee Pass.⁷ Abundant rumors also told of railroad survey crews heading toward the town of Jackson from the south. Without a doubt, many such surveys did occur, but were either purely speculative or done to maintain rights to potential routes; they were not an indication of intended construction.

Finally, early in 1909, survey crews in the Teton Valley on the west side of the Teton Range proved to be the serious beginning of the extension of the Oregon Short Line south from Ashton. The railroad reached Driggs, Idaho, on August 27, 1912, and, with financial help from the town of Jackson, reached Victor, Idaho on July 1, 1913.⁸ This end-of-line on the west side of Teton Pass would be as close as a railroad would ever get to Jackson Hole. The hauling of freight from the rapidly-growing economy of the Teton Valley had been a primary consideration in the building of what was to become known as the Teton Valley Branch, but an act of Congress in 1929, combined with the developing tourist industry in Jackson Hole, would add another dimension to the importance of this rail terminus.

Even prior to the completion of the Teton Valley Branch, dude ranching had become an important industry in Jackson Hole, and Union



Rieside Geyser throws its column over the Snake River.

TOUR "YT" 9 DAYS
 GRAND TETON — YELLOWSTONE
 NATIONAL PARKS
 JACKSON HOLE - SALT LAKE CITY - DENVER
 ALL EXPENSE — IN PULLMAN — LOW AS \$318.59 Plus Tax
 IN RECLINING SEAT COACH \$247.15 Plus Tax
 All Meals Are Included in the Cost
 SATURDAY DEPARTURES FROM CHICAGO

With a gateway at both Victor, Idaho, and West Yellowstone, Montana, the Union Pacific could offer travelers a package that included both Grand Teton and Yellowstone National Parks with a minimum of retraced routes. Courtesy the author.

in 1929, the Union Pacific Railroad began to advertise this "new-old" way to Yellowstone via its Oregon Short Line subsidiary to Victor and bus service over Teton Pass, heralded as "one of the most spectacular observation points in the West."¹⁰ Yellowstone National Park visitors were given the option of entering the park via Jackson Hole and Grand Teton National Park and leaving via the West Entrance and railhead at West Yellowstone. Early Union Pacific brochures described in colorful detail the scenic and historic grandeur of the Jackson Hole country and urged that "those planning a tour of Yellowstone should by all means arrange, if practicable, to allow the small additional time required for a visit to Grand Teton National Park, located close to it and possessing beauties differing in character but no less magnificent and inspiring than those of its sister park."¹¹ Many colorful railroad publications and railroad-sponsored Grand Teton/Yellowstone package tours combined to produce a good passenger business for the Union Pacific's Victor terminus.

Passenger traffic remained brisk until after World War II, when vast improvements in area roads, the growing popularity of the automobile, and the ease and speed of air travel gave visitors to Grand Teton and Yellowstone National Parks several other travel options. Freight traffic which,

Pacific Railroad passenger service to Victor was to become a primary means of travel to the valley's many ranches. Up to a dozen ranch cars would often meet the train at Victor for the 20-mile trip over Teton Pass into Jackson Hole.⁹ For many years, the railroad published an annual travel brochure touting the easy accessibility of Jackson Hole dude ranches by its daily service to Victor.

With the establishment of Grand Teton National Park by an act of Congress

in the years before World War II, had grown to include refrigerator cars of potatoes and peas, carloads of grain, and hopper cars of coal, decreased with the improvement of roads and the resultant shift of freight to trucks. Passenger service to Victor continued until 1965, when a daily passenger train and daily mixed train last appeared in the Union Pacific timetable. (Passenger service to West Yellowstone had ended five years earlier).¹² With the continued decrease in freight traffic, the Interstate Commerce Commission finally granted permission, in 1981, for the railroad to abandon the 15 miles from Teton, a small town north of Driggs, to Victor. Abandonment of the remaining 30 miles from Ashton to Teton followed in 1990, and the rails were pulled up shortly afterward.

Today, the Victor depot, converted to apartments, still stands at the end of the Teton Valley Branch. The old roadbed is easy to follow across the rolling land of the Teton Valley, with the peaks of the Teton Range forming the eastern horizon. The section of the line from Driggs to Victor has become a hiking and biking trail, preserving at least one small part of the experience once enjoyed by the many who traveled to the Tetons by train.

Notes

- ¹ Teton Mountain Route to Yellowstone Park (Chicago: Chicago and North Western Railway, 1922).
- ² Yellowstone (St. Paul: Northern Pacific Railway, 1933).
- ³ Livingston Daily Enterprise, 3 September 1883.
- ⁴ Livingston Daily Enterprise, 27 October 1883.
- ⁵ Thornton Waite, Yellowstone Branch of the Union Pacific (Columbia, Mo.: Brueggjenjohann/Reese, n.d.), 22.
- ⁶ Targhee National Forest (St. Anthony, Idaho: U.S. Department of Agriculture, U.S. Forest Service, 1907).
- ⁷ Jackson Hole Courier, 28 January 1909.
- ⁸ Don Snoddy, Union Pacific Museum, Omaha, Neb., personal communication with author, 1999.
- ⁹ Dude Ranches out West (Omaha: Union Pacific Railroad, 1948).
- ¹⁰ Grand Teton National Park (Omaha: Union Pacific Railroad, 1930).
- ¹¹ Ibid.
- ¹² Don Snoddy, Union Pacific Museum, Omaha, Neb., personal communication with author, 1999.

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